



India's Disarmament Initiative 1988: Continuing Relevance, Valid Pointers for an NFWF

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Abstract

The run up to the NPT Review Conference in 2010 brought nuclear disarmament into focus. Transitory though this trend turned out to be, it nevertheless became a trigger for India to re-examine its own position on disarmament. In order to take a considered view on the subject, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh instituted an Informal Group in October 2010 with the specific mandate to examine the relevance of the Action Plan that had been presented by Rajiv Gandhi in 1988. Were there any specific elements of that plan that were worth pursuing in the new security environment? What role could and should India play as a state with nuclear weapons in the pursuit of disarmament? Should India make the drive towards universal nuclear disarmament a priority in its diplomatic initiatives? Did India have the moral standing to do so after she herself had acquired the weapon? Has anything changed in the international climate to suggest that the Indian lead would attract like-minded nations? How should India approach other nations on this issue? These were some of the questions that the Informal Group considered before presenting its report to the Prime Minister in August 2011. It firmly conveyed the conviction that "India can and must play an effective and credible role as the leader of a campaign for the goal of universal nuclear disarmament, both because India can bring to the campaign its moral strength deriving from six decades of consistently campaigning for nuclear disarmament but also now the weight of its growing presence in the international system."

For six and a half long decades now India has been at the forefront of efforts for universal nuclear disarmament. During this period, it has introduced many resolutions — some uninterruptedly for at least three decades — at the United Nations General Assembly, and presented possible steps to get to disarmament. The most comprehensive of these was the Action Plan for a Nuclear-Weapon-Free and Non-violent World Order presented in 1988 by the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to the Third Special Session on Disarmament of the UNGA. The idea however proved to be ahead of its time and did not receive the attention it deserved from the international community.

A decade later, as India found herself compelled to develop a nuclear arsenal to cater to the nuclear threat environment in her neighbourhood, the country's own focus on disarmament seemed to somewhat blur. This is not to suggest that India lost interest in a nuclear-weapons-free-world (NFWF). But that New Delhi was no longer driven to take the lead on this at the international level, nor treat it as a burning priority in its foreign policy. So, routine noises

continued to be made at international fora and resolutions that had been long presented in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as a matter of habit continued to be tabled. But nothing of real significance emerged.

The situation did not change until 2006, when India submitted a Working Paper on nuclear disarmament in the First Committee of the UNGA and subsequently at the Conference on Disarmament to stimulate debate and promote consensus on the way forward. It listed seven practical measures to obtain the goal of a nuclear-weapons-free world, though the paper did not ascribe any rigid sequencing to their implementation. These included:

- Reaffirmation of the unequivocal commitment of all nuclear weapons states to the goal of complete elimination of nuclear weapons.
- Reduction of the salience of nuclear weapons in security doctrines.
- Adoption of measures by nuclear weapon states to reduce nuclear danger, including the risks of accidental use of nuclear weapons.
- Negotiation of a global agreement among nuclear weapon states on ‘no first use’ of nuclear weapons.
- Negotiation of a universal and legally binding agreement on non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states.
- Negotiation of a convention on the complete prohibition of use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.
- Negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention prohibiting the development, production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons, and on their destruction, leading to the global, non-discriminatory and verifiable elimination of nuclear weapons with a specified time frame.

While this Working Paper did not receive much traction in the Conference on Disarmament (CD), deadlocked as it then was and has been since on the issue of the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, the overall subject of nuclear disarmament did appear to have become fashionable after the four American Cold Warriors, George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn wrote two opinion pieces in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2007 and 2008 lending their voice to nuclear disarmament.^{1,2} This set into motion a spate of efforts at the governmental and non-governmental level with many new reports and road maps being drafted to achieve the elimination of nuclear weapons.* In fact, in the three years immediately preceding the NPT Review Conference in 2010, there was a near frenzy of writings and seminars on the desirability and feasibility of a world free of nuclear weapons. As expected, much of the noise subsided after May 2010.

This international focus on nuclear disarmament, transitory though it turned out to be, nevertheless became a trigger for India to re-examine its own position on disarmament. In order to take a considered view on the subject, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh instituted

*Some notable initiatives include the speech made by President Obama in Prague in April 2009 where he committed the US for the first time to the pursuit of nuclear disarmament; the Report entitled “Eliminating Nuclear Threats” prepared by the International Commission on Non-proliferation and Disarmament; the UK-Norway experiment on verifiable disarmament; and the many conferences organized by Global Zero.

an Informal Group* in October 2010 with the specific mandate to examine the relevance of the Action Plan that had been presented by Rajiv Gandhi in 1988. Were there any specific elements of that plan that were worth pursuing in the new security environment? What role could and should India play as a state with nuclear weapons in the pursuit of disarmament? Should India make the drive towards universal nuclear disarmament a priority in its diplomatic initiatives? Did India have the moral standing to do so after she herself acquired the weapon? Has anything changed in the international climate to suggest that the Indian lead would attract like-minded nations and gather a momentum? How should India approach other nations on this issue?

These were some of the questions that the Informal Group considered over many meetings, among themselves and with other experts on the subject. Finally, ten months after it had been instituted, the Informal Group presented its report to the Prime Minister in August 2011. It firmly conveyed the conviction that “*India can and must play an effective and credible role as the leader of a campaign for the goal of universal nuclear disarmament*, both because India can bring to the campaign its moral strength deriving from six decades of consistently campaigning for nuclear disarmament but also now the weight of its growing presence in the international system.”† Some of the major findings and recommendations of the report are summarised in the following sections.

1. Findings of the Informal Group

Contemporary nuclear challenges underscore the need for nuclear disarmament — The world today is grappling with the challenge of establishing strategic stability in a multi-nuclear world. This is not an easy proposition since multiple nuclear relations between two or more countries, each with its unique nature of deterrence, pose challenges not experienced during the bipolar nuclear world of the Cold War. To complicate matters further, the parameters of rationality of all the nuclear players cannot be expected to be the same. During the Cold War, the two superpowers had learnt to evolve a set of rules that brought a modicum of predictability and hence stability to the nuclear game. Some of the new nuclear players, however, believe in generating instability as a means of establishing deterrence. Therefore, as more countries join in, the complexities can only increase. And, in a crowded nuclear street, one can only hope that each has an equally effective control over its nuclear assets so as to minimise existential risks of inadvertent or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons.

At the same time, the non-state actor also threatens to gatecrash into the nuclear pen. Al Qaeda is well known for its desire to acquire nuclear weapons and if that were to happen, classical nuclear deterrence would not be able to avert the use of the weapon. In that unfortunate situation, the immediate physical damage that would result from such use would be equally matched by the breach of the psychological norm or taboo against the use of the nuclear weapon that is presently in place.

It was the realisation of this heightened risk from nuclear weapons that made President Obama begin to look at these weapons more as a liability than an asset. His personal com-

*The Group was instituted under the chairmanship of Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar, honourable Member of Parliament. The members included Cmde Uday Bhaskar (later Adm Ramdas joined in his place), Amb Satish Chandra, Mr. Arvind Gupta, Amb Saurabh Kumar, Prof. Amitabh Mattoo, Dr. Manpreet Sethi, and Mr. Siddharth Varadarajan.

†Emphasis added. Full text of the report is available on the Indian Pugwash Society website.

mitment to the cause of nuclear elimination has already won him the Nobel Peace Prize, but unfortunately he has not yet been able to get his administration to take any meaningful steps in this direction. In case Obama returns to the White House in 2013, it could provide a window of opportunity to push some meaningful measures in this direction.

Changed Indian position strengthens her ability to push for disarmament —

As a state with nuclear weapons, India brings greater credibility to her call for the elimination of nuclear weapons. When the country made this case before 1998 when she did not have the weapons, it was dismissed as a case of sour grapes, where India did not have the weapon and did not want others to have it either. But as a nuclear-armed state, India brings to the table her commitment to remove these weapons from her own arsenal and this lends sincerity to her demand for disarmament.

India's case for NFW is based on the logic of her national security — For India, the imperative of nuclear disarmament arises from the fact that the weapons with the adversaries pose a threat to the nation in more ways than one. Pakistan uses her nuclear weapons as a shield to carry out her policy of terrorism and thereby bleed India through a thousand cuts. The projection of a low nuclear threshold by Pakistan checkmates India's conventional military. Meanwhile, China's rapid nuclear modernisation carries the danger of subjecting India to nuclear blackmail or coercion, especially since the territorial disputes between the two are yet to be resolved. Though India's nuclear weapons do provide nuclear deterrence, the existential risks of an inadvertent nuclear exchange as a result of a miscalculation or an unauthorised launch cannot be ruled out. Therefore, India's security is best found in a situation where neither of her adversaries is armed with nuclear weapons. And this can only come about as a process of universal nuclear disarmament.

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Principles of the 1988 Action Plan Still Valid — The Action Plan presented by India in 1988 was premised on some basic principles that still remain valid for the realisation of an NFW. Five of these can be identified — *Universality*, since in order to be viable and sustainable, nuclear disarmament must necessarily be equally applicable to all. Each country that has nuclear weapons or the capability to build them has to accept the obligation to eliminate its stockpile, while those that are non-nuclear have to commit themselves to remaining so; *Non-discrimination*, since uniformity of commitments to uniformly applicable verification procedures and a singular standard of compliance is critical; *Verifiability*, since only this

can promise transparency in the process to foster confidence amongst states to stick to their pledges. While it is true that the scope of verification measures may need to be different for possessors and non-possessors of nuclear weapons, both intrusiveness and stringency must be equal in principle, theory and practice; *Simultaneity of collateral measures traversing security issues other than nuclear*; such as confidence building in areas of conventional forces, international treaty on prohibition of weaponisation of outer space, or getting the United Nations to evolve by consensus a new strategic doctrine of non-provocative defence. Only if nuclear disarmament is either the result of or results in more cooperative and secure inter-state relations, will countries not feel the need to move towards building other weapons to compensate for the perceived loss of security; *Tolerance and acceptance*, since the new world order will have to be based on “respect for various ideologies, on the right to pursue different socio-economic systems, and the celebration of diversity.” *Cooperative security*, in place of the current competitive security, is needed to meet not only the requirement of nuclear disarmament but also the many challenges of the 21st century. An indication of this understanding can be found in the UN Security Council Resolution 1887, adopted on 24 September 2009 under the chairmanship of President Obama. It established a linkage between nuclear disarmament and the promotion of international stability, peace and security premised on “the principle of increased and undiminished security for all.”

Non-proliferation is not a substitute for disarmament — In fact, non-proliferation is not sustainable without disarmament. It is the failure to recognise the symbiotic relationship between the two that has created the biggest weakness for the non-proliferation regime. As long as the nuclear weapon states continue to retain their nuclear arsenals, it would be impossible to get the NNWS to remain committed to their promises of non-proliferation.

2. Recommendations of the Informal Group

Bring back the focus on universal nuclear disarmament at the national and international levels — For all the reasons cited in the above section, the report recommends that India should make all attempts to bring back and retain the focus on nuclear disarmament. The report suggests a need for efforts to be made at both the national and international levels to generate an awareness of the inherent dangers of nuclear weapons. In fact, the need for building a national consensus on the very issue of whether India should take the lead in pushing the world towards disarmament came out clearly when in August 2012 at a National Outreach Conference held in New Delhi which saw the participation of some 1200 students, many linked India’s nuclear weapons with national status and security and argued against India making any efforts to give them up. Therefore, it is clear that public awareness on the limited value of nuclear weapons for India’s security or status and the fact that they have rather complicated security challenges will have to be built. At the same time, efforts at the international level are also necessary to raise the public’s awareness of nuclear dangers since these pretty much disappeared with the end of the Cold War. Unless people everywhere become aware of the dangers palpably, they are unlikely to push their leaders to change policies. It was with this belief that the Group recommended a return of focus to the issue of nuclear disarmament.

Use strategic partnerships to push a bilateral dialogue on nuclear disarmament — Given that India has a strategic dialogue with nearly every major nation today, the report recom-

mends that the subject of disarmament be included in the bilateral agenda as part of the ongoing diplomatic discussions. This would help India get a sense of how much attention and priority other countries are willing to invest in the subject. Accordingly then, India could decide on the timing, manner and scope of multilateral engagement on nuclear weapons elimination. This approach was preferred to one where India could offer another proposal/road map at the UNGA or other multilateral forum, without testing the waters first. Unlike the situation in 1988, the current climate finds India better placed to approach the countries bilaterally and judge their reactions in order to anticipate probable hurdles to the exercise.

Build concentric circles of concurrence — Besides engaging bilaterally with nations, the report also urges India to use opportunities where they exist to build upon steps that might create the right conditions for nuclear disarmament. For example, the focus that the NPT Review Conference 2010, the Non-Aligned Movement and other groups like the New Agenda Coalition have brought to an issue like negative security assurances could be used to push the proposal for a treaty on the subject. It may be recalled that negotiation of a universal and legally binding agreement on non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states is one of the seven steps that India had proposed in its Working Paper in 2006. Similar avenues of common ground could be found to build concentric circles of concurrence that might eventually enable the creation of an NFWF.

Undertake outreach conferences within India to explain the dangers of nuclear weapons and consequences of a nuclear exchange — It has been proved by scientific studies that any deliberate nuclear exchange even with low kiloton yields of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki variety will have repercussions that go beyond national and regional boundaries. During the height of the Cold War, an exchange between the US and USSR was calculated to cause a severe nuclear winter whose effects would have impacted the world. With the reduction in numbers, this fear might have dissipated a bit, but it has certainly not gone away. Rather, with the spread of nuclear weapons into more states, the dangers can only multiply.

But the public in India, Pakistan and China is insufficiently educated on the possible consequences of a nuclear conflict. None of the nations have brought out any official studies providing estimates of the likely deaths and destruction levels that a nuclear exchange could cause in areas as densely populated as these three countries are. The report, therefore, recommends that greater discussion and awareness on this dimension of the nuclear weapon would not only go towards enhancing deterrence but also prepare public opinion on nuclear disarmament.

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Identify measures that set the stage for nuclear disarmament — Elimination of nuclear weapons cannot be conducted in isolation or alienated from some parallel collateral mea-

asures that must simultaneously seek to reshape the premise and architecture of international security. Efforts at moving towards a nuclear-weapons-free world must include measures that help to build a positive overall atmosphere. Hence the need for steps such as legally binding and universally applicable negative security assurances, universal no first use commitments, and a ban on the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. Measures such as these would substantially alter threat perceptions and reduce the salience of nuclear weapons, thus creating the constructive framework within which countries will find it easier to enter into meaningful nuclear weapons elimination engagements and negotiations.

Settle for a Time-bound but Flexible Plan — The delineation of phases or the adoption of a time-bound approach for disarmament has evoked much controversy. In the Action Plan of 1988, India had recommended a three-stage time-bound plan to get to zero nuclear weapons. The first and second phases were to last 6 years each while the final phase was to last a decade. However, over the years, many countries, such as France and Russia, have opposed the creation of ‘artificial timelines’. But the problem with no schedule is that it could remain open-ended without creating tangible benchmarks of progress. So, it would be far more helpful if some consensually agreed upon phases for implementation of steps were evolved. The timelines could be negotiated to arrive at a broad consensus, but to have no deadlines for necessary actions would be akin to having a dead plan.

3. Conclusion

In 1988 Rajiv Gandhi had said:

*Humanity is at a crossroads. One road will take us like lemmings to our suicide. That is the path indicated by doctrines of nuclear deterrence, deriving from traditional concepts of the balance of power. The other road will give us another chance. That is the path signposted by the doctrine of peaceful coexistence, deriving from the imperative values of non-violence, tolerance and compassion.**

Humanity is still poised at the same juncture today. This is both a fortunate and an unfortunate reality. It is fortunate because mankind has not yet blown itself up in a nuclear holocaust and the numbers of nuclear weapons have progressively reduced. At the same time, it is also unfortunate that humanity has not progressed down the road to a nuclear-weapons-free world. So, while the numbers may have reduced from a peak of 70,000 to about 20,000 today, the dangers from nuclear weapons remain and have only grown in dimension and become more challenging.

We inhabit today a world where far more numbers of states have nuclear weapons; where even more could be tempted to cross the threshold, thereby leaving a large tear in the non-proliferation fabric; where non-state actors are powerful enough to pose threats to state security; where the possibility of non-state actors acquiring nuclear material or weapons for terrorism, either with or without state complicity has multiplied; where inter-state relations are mired in mutual mistrust; and where the possibility of a nuclear incident – terrorist-triggered or state-sponsored – occurring somewhere in the world poses a risk. President Obama stated at the Nuclear Security Summit in April 2010, “It is an irony that while the risks of a nuclear confrontation have come down, the risks of a nuclear attack have increased.”

*n.1, p. 141

With an increase in nuclear dangers, there must be a simultaneous progression in our understanding that the only sustainable route to mitigating these dangers has to pass through a nuclear-weapons-free world. And, such a world must be built on the pillars of certain principles that promise equal, cooperative security to all.

As a state with nuclear weapons, but one that has restricted the role of its nuclear weapons to deterrence alone, which has premised its arsenal on the pillars of credible nuclear deterrence, a no first use and non-use against non-nuclear weapon states, India is already demonstrating an example of nuclear restraint and living the steps that can move the world towards nuclear elimination.

As an economic power of considerable import, India today has the ear of major international players. This provides an opportunity to push issues that could address India's security concerns too and fortunately this is equally a global challenge that is beginning to be realized. It is in this backdrop that the Informal Group found merit in re-examining the initiative of 1988 whose robustness and validity remain despite the passage of time.

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Notes

1. George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons" *Wall Street Journal* January 4, 2007 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB116787515251566636.html>
2. George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and Sam Nunn, "Toward a Nuclear-Free World" *Wall Street Journal* January 15, 2008.